CHAPTER THREE 1888-1913

The Big Wind And Financial Panic In A Single Quarter-Century

Depression and tornado only delayed Louisville's march forward

IN SPITE of a national financial panic and the most tragic natural disaster ever to hit the city, the 1888-1913 years might be called a period of light in Louisville, speaking both literally and figuratively.

For the great upsurge of civic awakening, cultural development and expanded business activity that had started once the city began to recover from the effects of the Civil War continued throughout this quarter-century.

Figuratively, it was a period of light because population passed the 200,000 mark, Louisville's first "sky-scraper" was built, more schools, hospitals and public buildings were erected, the moving picture and aviation came to the city, five different medical schools were consolidated into the University of Louisville College of Medicine, the city became the world's largest tobacco market, plans were laid for Louisville's nationally-famous park system, for the second time in 25 years the city outgrew its postoffice, and Louisville cultivated a taste for the best to be had in the arts.

Literally, the 25-year span was a time of light because it was during this period that the art of electric lighting came of age. Whereas in 1888 commercial electricity was little more than a fad, by 1913 it rapidly was becoming a necessity.

And to meet the ever-growing demand for electricity, more than 140 individual steam power plants were pressed into operation in Louisville. This list included plants of some 10 different commercial companies; the others were plants operated by industries and even office buildings and institutions to supply their own needs.

The presence of so many electric companies in the field meant each had to establish its own generating plant, a factor that created a confusing and costly duplication of service facilities and, in the end, high rate charges to customers.

It was under such circumstances that, after months of negotiations, on July 2, 1913, the Louisville Gas and Electric Company, which traced its origin back to the day in early February of 1838 when the Louisville Gas and Water Company was formed, emerged as a consolidation of all the commercial power companies doing business in the city.

The result of this merger was the centrally produced, dependable, abundant and progressively cheaper electricity on which Louisville was to build its future.

Only two blots appeared to mar what otherwise was a bright period of real progress. One was a natural, the other something of a man-made disaster.

March 27, 1890, dawned gloomy in Louisville even though the weather forecast was for fair weather followed by rain, easterly winds and stationary temperature.

However, as the day wore on, gusty winds began building up in intensity. Then, at 8:30 p.m., a heavy rain suddenly pelted the city. A short time later, with a sound like that

MULE CARS WERE USED BUT THEIR END WAS COMING

When the 1888-1913 period dawned, mule cars still were the leading means of transportation in Louisville. The first electric street cars came in the 1890's and then the days of the mules were drawing to an end. This particular fireball express covered the run from downtown to Churchill Downs. Note the driver's natty uniform.